2017

Temporary Meddlers: Friars in Measure for Measure and Romeo and Juliet

Sarah Friedman

Temporary Meddlers: Friars in *Measure for Measure* and *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare wrote during a time of intense religious controversy, as Protestants, Catholics, and Puritans vied for spiritual authority in England. Although Henry VIII broke from the Catholic Church in the 1530s, Shakespeare's work seems to still have been heavily influenced by Roman Catholic traditions. Both *Measure for Measure* and *Romeo and Juliet* are set in Catholic places and Catholic friars manipulate the outcomes in both plays. The portrayal of these characters offers insight into how Shakespeare may have viewed Catholics, as he did not leave behind clear evidence of his own religious convictions. The friars in *Measure for Measure* and *Romeo and Juliet* are well intentioned in their attempts to resolve Claudio's impending execution in the former play and Romeo and Juliet's forbidden relationship in the latter, but their meddlesome nature can be seen as problematic. Friar Laurence, in *Romeo and Juliet*, aids the titular couple in an attempt to end the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues, but the secret wedding that he performs results in the deaths of the two young people. In *Measure for Measure*, the friars help Duke Vincentio to conceal his identity, but in doing so, they allow a man who is not ordained to go into the community and give spiritual counsel without proper qualifications. Through these characters, Shakespeare suggests that Catholic friars can be well intentioned figures, but they are fallible human beings who are prone to meddling in the earthly affairs of the people who seek their guidance.

The Reformation prohibited Catholic practices in England and dissolved the monasteries. It became illegal for Catholics to openly practice their faith and the Act of Uniformity of 1559 established a requirement that all citizens attend Protestant services (Fielitz 72). The Jesuits came to England in an attempt to reestablish Catholicism and maintain the underground recusant community. Stratford-upon-Avon "has long been known as a stronghold of recusancy and

Catholic resistance," so Shakespeare likely grew up in the presence of Catholics, if he was not one himself (73). According to Fielitz, he had familial ties to the old religion as, "his mother's side was Catholic," and his father "might have been converted (to the Catholic faith) by the first Jesuit missionary priests who had penetrated to the vicinity of Stratford-upon-Avon by 1580" (73-4). Shakespeare also had three Catholic teachers in grammar school who were connected with the Jesuits (75-6). He would have grown up acutely aware of the tensions between the authority of the Catholic Church and the authority of the English government, and, by extension the Church of England, because the town he grew up in was directly involved in the religious upheaval. Due to these possible Catholic influences on his upbringing, the way that Shakespeare portrays Catholic figures in his plays, specifically friars, is particularly interesting.

In his writing, Shakespeare confronts the issues of religion, including the portrayals of Catholic friars, in ways that are uncharacteristic for his time period. Beauregard argues that Shakespeare takes an especially sympathetic approach to his portrayals of Catholic religious figures. He states that

> with the advent of Reformed theology, however, religious life itself came under literary attack, and such things as vows, cloistered life, celibacy, and the priesthood were pilloried. In early Reformation drama, the conventional figure of the Vice was often portrayed as a Roman Catholic priest-player. (Beauregard 150)

Shakespeare does not follow this trope in his writings. The break from the norms of the time period might suggest that Shakespeare did sympathize with Catholicism, but it may also be a result of his desire to reach a large, diverse audience, which would have included people of different faiths. Shakespeare may have wanted to avoid controversy and promote reconciliation between the various religions by including benevolent Catholic friars (Knapp 52-3). Knapp

argues that Shakespeare chose friars as representatives of Catholicism because of "…their itinerancy, which Shakespeare appears to believe, helps separate them from parochialism" (53). Friars would be more readily trusted by audiences because, "…friars and the Franciscan habit are associated with authority and truth…" (Beauregard 154). Shakespeare might have strategically chosen friars because they were seen as less corrupt than other more powerful Catholic figures, like bishops, and the audience would be more likely to accept them.

Despite the fact that Shakespeare does not vilify friars in his plays in the way that many of his contemporaries did, these characters are far from being perfect models of spirituality. Knapp claims that Shakespeare's friars are "…addicted to a secretiveness and subterfuge" (Knapp 53). Duke Vincentio and the friars in *Measure for Measure* and Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet* exhibit a desire to help their communities, but they use lies and deception to influence secular political and social matters. Whether the dishonesty is justified is unclear and cannot be reduced to a question of whether Shakespeare's friars are morally good or bad and, furthermore, whether Shakespeare used these characters to project a pro or anti-Catholic image. Friar Laurence and Duke Vincentio seem to fall somewhere in the middle, as they desire good outcomes for their communities, but in the process they are meddling in secular business that extend beyond the spiritual realm of a friar, who is expected to carry out his divine mission with truth and virtue.

Friar Laurence is one of Shakespeare's early friar characters and throughout the play, he has good intentions to help his community, but he pursues these intentions in a morally problematic way. Friar Laurence is not a Vice character; he maintains his vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and he tries to carry out his spiritual duties, but he also uses deceptive practices to meddle in the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues. David Kastan believes

that the friar's failure comes from "…ministering to Romeo's heart instead of his soul" (Kastan 52). Friar Laurence has the laudable desire to help, but he is going about it in the wrong ways by failing to give proper spiritual guidance. Rather than encouraging Romeo and Juliet to be truthful with their families, Friar Laurence appeases the rash young couple by giving in to their request that he secretly marry them, even though it is not the best choice for them from a spiritual perspective. By "…agreeing to perform a clandestine marriage, though both the Roman and the English Church forbade priests to perform such weddings," Friar Laurence becomes an example of a Franciscan who has failed to properly carry out his duty, and this failure makes him partially responsible for the resulting deaths (52). He is "…the greatest, able to do the least," because he uses his power as a mediator to place himself at the center of the longstanding feud that cannot be resolved by one man (5.3.223). The friar has the greatest power over the situation, as he is a trusted confidant for the young couple, but he makes the mistake of assuming that he alone can conceal the relationship without following the rules set in place by the Church.

Friar Laurence exerts significant influence over Verona, but his deception precipitates the tragic ending of the play. The friar orchestrates the relationship between Romeo and Juliet, from surreptitiously marrying them to providing Juliet with the potion to fake her own death. Performing a marriage is well within the spiritual duties of a friar, but Friar Laurence's actions reach beyond the spiritual realm when he attempts to hide the marriage and manipulate the two families. Friar Laurence singlehandedly tries to "…turn your households' rancor to pure love" and he uses the young couple as the means of accomplishing this (2.2.92). Rather than seeking a solution with the help of other mediators, Friar Laurence believes he can "give thee remedy" and help Juliet to continue to hide her relationship from her family (4.1.76). The friar's intentions of bringing the community together are admirable, but by helping the couple to secretly elope, he is

positioning himself at the center of the feud. His failure as friar to be an honest spiritual advisor and his meddlesome behavior brings about the tragic end.

Duke Vincentio's disguise as Friar Lodowick produces a more favorable outcome in *Meausure for Measure,* but like Friar Laurence, he also uses the spiritual powers conferred on him by the friar's robe to manipulate secular matters in the city. By identifying with the friars, the Duke is not only granted an anonymous perspective from which he can view Angelo's actions, he is given the ability to actively manipulate events. Vincentio goes beyond using his friar's robes to "…behold [Angelo's] sway" (1.4.34). He repeatedly invokes the authority of the order he claims to belong to in order to justify his behaviors, but this authority is rooted in lies. Vincentio travels through a variety of social circles with the statements, like,"Bound by my charity and my blessed order,/ I come to visit the afflicted spirits/ Here in the prison" "Leave me a/ while with the maid. My mind promises with my habit, no/ loss shall touch her by my company," and "By the vow of mine order, I warrant you. If my instruct-/tions may be your guide, let this Barnardine be this morning/ executed and his head borne to Angelo" (2.3.3-5, 3.1.174-6, 4.2.161-3). Simply stating that he is ordained allows him to hear confessions in the prison, to be alone with a young woman, and to demand that the executioner ignore Angelo's order for Claudio's execution. In a society dominated by Catholic belief, the clergy are the most powerful men in the community, because their role combines social mobility and spiritual authority that can only be achieved through ordination.

In the process of pretending to be a friar, Duke Vincentio is allowed to deprive the people of Vienna of proper spiritual guidance. The real friars who help hide his identity allow Vincentio to go out into the city and pretend to provide absolution and last rites. The Duke disguised as a friar requests, "…let me see them and to make me know/ The nature of their crimes, that I may

minister/ To them accordingly" (2.3.7-8) By pretending to have the powers of a real friar to gain access to the prison, Vincentio denies the prisoners the opportunity for real absolution before facing their executions. Vincentio's actions would be seen as a very grave matter in the Catholic Church, as he is denying people the opportunity to save their souls. The real friars, in allowing Vincentio to wear the friar's robes and masquerade as a real friar are complicit in his actions, because they confer their authority on an unordained man, who cannot provide real spiritual guidance and administer important sacraments. The disguise also allows Vincentio to decide whose life is valuable, choosing to save Claudio by executing another prisoner in his place. The Duke is able to make serious life or death decisions, because the real friars have vested him with their respect and authority. The prison guard, believing that Friar Lodowick is a real friar, trusts him and is willing to go along with the plot to execute Barnadine, even though it goes against the laws of Vienna and Angelo's authority.

Vincentio's behavior is overlooked by the real friars, who should be aware of the spiritual repercussions of allowing a man who is not ordained to deceive people and administer religious rites that he is not qualified to oversee. The friars seemingly have no misgivings about the use of deception to help Vincentio in his plot to secretly intervene in Angelo's leadership. They do not simply agree to provide the Duke with a place to hide and observe Angelo from afar; rather, they fulfill his request that they "Supply me with the habit, and instruct me/ How I may formally in person bear/ Like a true friar" (1.4.46-8). In agreeing to carry out the Duke's request, the real friars agree to give an impostor the authority and respect that they have earned by devoting their lives to God. They seem to be diminishing the importance of their own roles in the community, by allowing a politician with no real spiritual authority to carry out the duties of their vocation. The friars unquestioningly participate in the ruse and, in doing so, they grant Vincentio their

religious authority, which he repeatedly abuses to earn the trust of the citizens of Vienna. The friars may have agreed to conceal Vincentio out of trust for their political leader and a desire for the betterment of Vienna (which seems unlikely, as sinfulness and immorality is rampant under the reign of the Duke), but they may also have chosen to align themselves with the most powerful man in the city, increasing their own power and influence over community. Either way, the plot places the friars at the center of Vienna's political world, because they are the only people in the city who know Friar Lodowick's true identity.

The power struggle between Catholics and the Protestant English monarchy is an underlying tension that appears in the play. The monarch, who, according to Sir Robert Filmer, "…claims not his power as a donative from the people, but as being substituted properly by God, from whom he receives his royal charter of an universal father," must compete with authority of the pope, who also claims to receive his authority from God (McDonald, 284). Duke Vincentio is a powerful political figure, but he must turn to the real friars to hide his identity, giving them unique political power in Vienna, because they are the only ones who know his secret. The ruler must seek out the friars and request that they teach him how to act "like a true friar" (1.4.48). The friars live under the power of the Duke, because he has political authority over the city, but they also answer to a higher power: the pope. This has the potential to produce a power struggle between the monarchy and the papacy, because the clergy's allegiance is divided between two supposedly divine figures. In "An Answer to the Catholics' Supplication," Christopher Muriel argues that "whatsoever [Catholics] profess in words, they cannot serve God and the Devil, neither can they truly serve and obey you [King James I] and the pope" (McDonald 345). As long as Vienna remains a Catholic city, powerful men, like Duke Vincentio, must respect the authority of the pope, and, by extension, all ordained men. The Reformation in England was very

much connected to this power struggle, as Henry VIII asserted his own power by declaring himself both the monarch and the head of the Church of England, removing the external influence of Rome. During Shakespeare's lifetime, the monarchy continued to suppress Catholicism, because Catholics could not be completely loyal to the crown, and that makes them a threat to the ruler's power. Duke Vincentio seems to mirror the English monarchy's combination of spiritual and political power by pretending to be a friar, because in becoming a friar, he has authority in both realms. By hearing confessions, "the Duke can procure the secrets of the soul so that they become fully available to the sovereign state" (Beckwith 73). Rather than breaking from the Catholic Church, Vincentio infiltrates it and usurps its unique spiritual jurisdiction.

Another religious dispute within the play that reflects religious tensions of Shakespeare's time is the disagreement between Catholics and Puritans, which is reflected in the characters of Duke Vincentio and Angelo. Vincentio is playing the role of a Catholic figure, and he uses this role to manipulate the political sphere. Angelo is described as "precise," suggesting Puritanism, and his strict ruling that Claudio be put to death is undermined by Vincentio (3.1.94). There is a conflict between the Catholic figure and the Puritan figure, and, ultimately, the Duke as a Catholic friar prevails over the puritanical deputy. Duke Vincentio's meddling in Angelo's ruling suggests that the Catholic Church is able to manipulate political dealings from outside of the public view and it is able to use cunning tactics to successfully overcome corrupt Puritanism.

The role of the friars in both plays is complicated by the difference in genres. As a problem comedy, *Measure for Measure* can only result in a good outcome. Duke Vincentio's actions, although problematic, turn out for the best, because the play is designed to produce a resolution. As a tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet* is doomed to have a tragic ending. The prologue

states that Romeo and Juliet are "A pair of star-crossed lovers," so the couple is doomed to suffer a grim fate from the outset of the play (Prologue. 6). Nothing that Friar Laurence or any of the other characters do can reverse the tragic outcome. Perhaps, even if Friar Laurence had perfectly carried out his spiritual duties as a friar, the outcome would remain unchanged, because he is operating within a tragedy. The success of Shakespeare's friars may be confined by the play's genre and completely independent of the morality of the characters. The friars may just be a device that helps to move the play to the end that Shakespeare intended. *Romeo and Juliet* was designed to be a tragedy, so a friar, who can easily reach out to both of the feuding families, could conveniently facilitate the desired ending. *Measure for Measure* was intended to be a problem comedy, and a politician dressed as a friar, who appears to be a member of an order that is respected by the community, could be used to produce the ending that Shakespeare desired. Friars are convenient, as they are some of the most universally trusted members of the community and they can easily interact with members of different social circles, so Shakespeare may have chosen to use friars because they make such flexible characters.

If friars are in fact simply plot devices, it seems curious that Shakespeare would portray them as such complex, meddlesome men. Friar Peter ironically says that Friar Lodowick is "a man divine and holy,/ not scurvy, nor a temporary meddler" (5.1.149-50). Of course, Duke Vincentio does nothing but meddle in temporary affairs while he is disguised as a friar. Even though this statement is used to describe the Duke, who is masquerading as a friar, it could be extended to evaluate all of the friars who appear in the plays. All of the real friars in *Measure for Measure* mingle their religious power with political influence by associating with the Duke. It seems that, at least according to Friar Peter, a good friar does not involve himself in secular affairs. By this definition, Friar Laurence, Duke Vincentio, and the real friars of Vienna all fail at

their roles, because they are deeply involved in the earthly problems of their communities. Shakespeare seems to be commenting on how friars are supposed to act as perfect holy men, when, in reality, they are complex human beings who make mistakes. Friars are men and they cannot separate their earthly experiences from their divine duties. Friar Laurence and Duke Vincentio want to help others using the powers conferred by ordination, but as fallible men, they sometimes try to accomplish good ends in the wrong ways. As spiritual advisors, the members of their community come to them with secular problems seeking guidance, so it is difficult to separate temporary meddling from religious guidance. Shakespeare seems to take a very moderate stance on how Catholic friars should be perceived as he exposes a human side to his characters; they are not simply evil Vice characters who flout their vows, but they also are not without sin. Even though Duke Vincentio usurps the powers conferred by ordination and at times uses them in ways that deprive others of proper spiritual guidance, he does so with a desire to help Isabella, save Claudio, and keep Angelo from abusing his power. The real friars of Vienna allow Vincentio's inappropriate use of their power, but they do so after the most powerful politician in the city seeks their aid claiming that he plans to use the disguise to ensure that Angelo will not abuse his position "if power change purpose" (1.3.54). Friar Laurence misguidedly tries to use Romeo and Juliet's relationship as a means to bring about peace between two prominent families whose feud at times turns violent. All the men have some more noble, pious intentions and some less admirable motivations for their actions, as real people often do. These characters do not provide a clear answer to whether Shakespeare favored any particular religious beliefs, rather, they demonstrate his ability to write realistic, three dimensional characters.

Shakespeare's England was rife with religious tensions, which he carefully wove into the narratives of his plays. Friar Laurence and Duke Vincentio demonstrate the complexity and ambiguity of Shakespeare's personal views on Catholicism because, although these characters are associated with the old religion, he does not choose to condemn or praise them. Readers and viewers may draw very different conclusions about whether the friars' good attributes outweigh their faults, or vice versa. In both plays, the duty of the friars to minister to the public is intertwined with political and social problems that people face in their everyday lives, so it is unrealistic to say that friars should not be "temporary meddler[s]" (5.1.150). From Shakespeare's depictions in these two plays it seems that as human beings, friars are unable to only focus on the divine, because they live in the earthly realm, and this does not necessarily mark them as bad people; instead, it shows them as complicated characters who are not immune to human weaknesses.

Works Cited

Beauregard, David N. "Shakespeare on Monastic Life: Nuns and Friars in *Measure for Measure*." *Catholic Theology in Shakespeare's Plays*. Newark: U of Delaware, 2008. 149-59. *Literature Criticism Online [Gale]*. Web. 14 Mar. 2017.

Beckwith, Sarah. "Repairs in the Dark." *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*. N.p.: Cornell UP, 2011. 59-81. Print.

Fielitz, Sonja. "Shakespeare and Catholicism: The Jesuits as Cultural Mediators in Early Modern Europe." *Critical Survey* 21.3 (2009): 72-86. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 Mar. 2017.

Kastan, David Scott. *A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion*. Oxford: Oxford U, 2014. Print.

Knapp, Jeffrey. *Shakespeare's Tribe: Church, Nation, and Theater in Renaissance England*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago, 2004. Print.

McDonald, Russ. *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001. Print.

Shakespeare, William, Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Suzanne Gossett, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Gordon McMullan. *The Norton Shakespeare*. 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2016. Print.